

WILKINSON, OLIVER HENRY

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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Oliver Perry Wharton

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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Editor of Mahoning Vindicator Helped Found Republican Party

By JANIE S. JENKINS
Vindicator Feature Writer

He once sat on the steps of the Senate chamber at Springfield, Ill., and chatted with Abraham Lincoln.

He helped draft the resolution founding the Republican Party in Illinois, that body being responsible for launching Lincoln toward the presidency.

His service record in the Civil War was marked by demotions and transfers because he dared to expose shenanigans of his superior officers.

He is a part of this area's past, having been a printer at and later editor of the weekly *Mahoning Vindicator* and going on to be editor of the *Sandusky Journal*.

These and other fascinating tales about Oliver Perry Wharton could not be told if his great-granddaughter, Mae Wharton Snodgrass of Uniontown, hadn't found some of his effects — including the whimsical Groundhog Day postcard — in an attic trunk.

That find in 1977 launched her on a genealogical expedition both here and abroad and even though Wharton's stay in Youngstown was comparatively brief, many of his descendants remained in the area and in western Pennsylvania. His eldest son, Henry, who was also a printer, was buried in 1879 in Youngstown's Oak Hill Cemetery after services at the family home on Rayen Avenue.

Certainly, Wharton's greatest claim to fame was his involvement on the resolutions committee at the convention of Anti-Nebraska editors — he was at that time editor of the *Rock Island (Ill.) Advertiser* — at Decatur on Feb. 22, 1856. He was among 12 other Whig editors whose assemblage resulted in the formal organization of the Republican Party in Illinois the following May.

Principal speaker was Lincoln himself, the only outsider, and 55 years later an address by Wharton entitled "Lincoln and the Beginning of the Republican Party in Illinois" was read at the annual meeting of the Illinois State Historical Society.

In the address, Wharton recalls a subsequent meeting with Lincoln at the Springfield Convention in 1858, the occasion of Lincoln's memorable speech beginning, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Wharton related, "I was sitting on the steps of the rostrum of the Senate chamber from which he spoke and at the conclusion of his speech he sat down on the steps beside me and to my surprise demanded to know what I thought of it ... I replied that he had spoken too briefly ... it seemed to me too lofty for his audience. Lincoln responded that my criticism was perhaps correct ... and that if I would write a resolution commending the renomination of the state ticket and the acts of the party, he would offer it himself and make such further remarks as the case seemed to require.

"I wrote the resolution requested by him and he did get up and offer it with some Lincoln-like remarks which had the effect desired and all went off apparently satisfied. There was not then at that time much anti-slavery sentiment among the voters of Illinois and his speech actually sounded the death knell of slavery in the United States if they were to remain united."

Afterward, Lincoln was defeated by Stephen A. Douglas for the Illinois Senate but his triumphant debate with Douglas led to his election as President two years later.

Wharton was 31 when he enlisted in the 16th Iowa Volunteers on Feb. 16, 1862. He was promoted to sergeant-major on March 24 by Col. Alexander Chambers and both men would be at the Battle of Shiloh in April with Col. Chambers being wounded.

In a letter to his former commander 25 years later, Wharton hoped Chambers would recall their being at Shiloh together — "you stood in your place on the



Oliver Perry Wharton, editor of the *Mahoning Vindicator* after serving in the Civil War, had this portrait taken by F.C. Viets, Commercial Photographer, 107 Lincoln Ave., sometime between 1871 and 1886. Wharton was one of 12 Whig editors who founded the Republican Party of Illinois.

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field and were there wounded and I stood in my place there and saw it" — as well as two health-related incidents which, if documented, would increase his pension of \$8 a month.

One disability he referred to as "a frightful diarrhea which was prevalent and with which I was particularly afflicted ... and never fully recovered ... and together with exposure brought on a disease of the heart." The other was an injury incurred during an advance to Corinth in mid-May "when I injured my left ankle severely in jumping over a large fallen tree ... and one of the bones is

thought to be permanently out of place."

Unfortunately, Wharton was not to receive that documentation. A letter from Col. Chambers' brother informed him "my brother is an invalid and has been for nearly three years and has no recall of the occurrences you speak of."

What actually happened is that after a severe attack of pericarditis while on the march under Gen. Ulysses Grant south from Holly Springs, Miss., near Abbeville, Wharton was hospitalized at LaGrange, Tenn.

Declared unfit for service, he was honorably discharged but re-enlisted and

was commissioned a hospital steward.

It is Wharton's own handwritten account of his experiences in that position and his revelations of wrongdoing in the hospital at Vicksburg that make such fascinating reading. Because of those revelations, on March 30, 1864, he was ordered by Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson to duty in the Small Pox Hospital at Natchez and would eventually be taken to military prison at Louisville, Ky., and thence to the guardhouse at Newport Barracks.

No charges were filed, however, and he was honorably discharged on May 28, 1865, two days after the surrender of the last rebel troops.

His troubles began after being assigned to the convalescent camp at Hospital No. 3 at Vicksburg on Feb. 3, 1864. He was later to write the following report.

"I remained there about two weeks when Surgeon George Kemble commenced cleaning out one of the hospital buildings in order to give a ball in it. The ball came off Feb. 23. In consequence ... all other hospital room was filled up and several men were taken down in Convalescent Camp with measles when it was impossible to get into hospital.

"The weather was cold and wet and there was neither fire or proper shelter or covering in the tents. So that when the ball was over and they finally got into hospital some of them were so badly off they died almost immediately. Surgeon Kemble knew of their condition in the tents because he ordered me to keep them there and do the best I could.

"I blamed him for giving a ball under such circumstances, at least in the hospital, and expressed my opinion. The hospital attendants then began to talk of many other things — the improper use made of the hospital fund purchases, sanitary supplies, etc.

"It came out that all the hospital wines were consumed at the ball as there was none to be had for the sick for several days and the other liquors gone into heavily, that the canned fruits and other delicacies, ales, ports, wines, etc., were used for picnics and sent about town to houses of secessionist friends in the most reckless manner."



Mae Wharton Snodgrass of Uniontown found this whimsical Groundhog Day card in an attic trunk containing other personal effects of her great-grandfather. Wharton was personally acquainted with Abraham Lincoln before the war.

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Retribution for Wharton's accusations — and there were many more — were swift. He himself was accused — falsely — of selling quartermasters' blankets and of using liquors in the dispensary. He was forbidden to enter the dispensary even in the discharge of his duties and was subsequently transferred to Natchez, then to Memphis, then to Mound City from where he was taken under guard to prison.

Witnesses, including the commissary, who had agreed to testify to the veracity of his report were hurried under guard onto a steamer with orders to rejoin their regiments while a "sham" investigation into the matter cleared Wharton's superiors.

In 1866, Wharton spent two weeks with a newspaper at Beaver Falls, Pa. Although his life from then un-

til 1871 is not documented, that was the year he started as a printer at the *Mahoning Vindicator* of which he would be editor until moving to Sandusky in 1885.

In his 1887 letter to Col. Chambers, he noted "I am an old man now being within about a month of 57 years ... pretty well broken up physically and financially." He retired to California from Sandusky in 1906 and died May 18, 1912, at the age of 82, in the Soldier's Home at Sawtelle.

His first wife died in 1895. In 1897 he married Judge Bigelow's 33 yr old daughter. They moved to Calif. in 1906.

He was at the Vet's Hosp. it says when he died at age 81

His letter began "Sir, may I salute you after a quarter of a century!"

→ Needed to make a deadline!

THE YOUNGSTOWN DAILY VINDICATOR

MONDAY, JANUARY 30, 1984



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